DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 373 SO 012 863

AUTHOR Amundsen, Kirsten
TITLE New Worlds in Collision: Feminism and the UN.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 31p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association (San Francisco, CA, 1976).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conferences; *Developed Nations; *Developing Nations; Females; *Feminism; Global Approach; *Sex Discrimination; Sex Role; World Problems
IDENTIFIERS *International Womens Year; *United Nations

ABSTRACT

Ideological problems and barriers leading to the failure of the World Conference during International Women's Year (IWY) are discussed. Support for the International Year and for the conference was not unanimous within the United Nations and funding was small compared to other UN-sponsored world conferences. Also, at a late date the government of Colombia withdrew its invitation to have the conference in Bogota. The subsequent invitation from Mexico, although accepted, was considered a result of personal ambitions of then President Escheverria. A tremendous defeat occurred when priorities of IWY were ordered in the form of a Draft International Plan. Developing countries, the majority of the consultative committee, agreed that the focus of the conference should be on the problems of society and the New International Economic Order. As the conference convened it became clear that attention was to be riveted on issues that had little or no relevance to the problems caused by sexual discrimination. Ideological lines were drawn between Third World nations and Western countries. Relative to this issue, it must be remembered that female representatives of Third World countries were often wives of high officials or women professionals who existed socially at a great distance from the mass of women in their own country. In conclusion, the ideological debacle of the IWY conference raises serious questions about the structure of the UN and the uses to which it is put. (Author/KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Kirsten Amundson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED194373

SO 012 863

NEW WORLDS IN COLLISION: FEMINISM AND THE UN

by

Kirsten Amundsen
Associate Professor of Government
California State University, Sacramento

The following commentary, prepared for delivery at the 1976 annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association is based to a large extent on personal observations of the UN through attendance -- as a correspondent -- at two world conferences and a recent session of the Security Council. I have chosen not to report on the Women's Tribune in Mexico City, June 1975, both because that meeting was extensively covered by the press and because the political dynamics of the official UN Conference was largely missed in all reports seen so far. My analysis and conclusions regarding the failure of the UN in this undertaking is not meant to extend to the activities of participants at the Tribune. With all the problems emerging at that meeting, it is still my impression that the Tribune provided the most -- possibly also only -- fruitful exchange and interaction in the central event of International Women's Year.

Kirsten Amundsen

SEP 2 2 1980

Introduction

It is surely the sharpest of ironies and saddest of mishaps that the United Nations should come under severe attack -- its very existence challenged -- just as women throughout the world began turning to the world organization as a central focus for newfound hopes and aspirations. From the point of view of feminists and women generally, the recent explosive UN confrontations could not have erupted at a more inopportune time. The handwriting may have been on the walls for months, if not years; yet there is no question of the shock and dismay registered among the western publics as the politics of wreckage at the UN swung into motion in the Fall of 1975. What surfaced was, quite simply, the first clear view of the feuds and the follies that have come to threaten "mankind's best hope". Few failed to recognize the impact.

1975, it must be remembered, was the year for the UN to forge ahead with a pioneering work of great human significance. International Women's Year received its launching at last with the solemn declaration on the part of the world organization to seek an end to the oldest and most persistent form of repression and discrimination known to us. Women this time were to get their due in terms of the commitment of attention and resources of the UN to help solve their surprisingly formidable problems in modern times. In at least partial recognition of the destructive consequences of sexual discrimination in many areas of life, experts and officials in charge of IWY announced its theme to be nothing less than "Equality, Development and Peace".

The UN this time had a rare opportunity to regain some of its declining popularity and perceived relevance in many quarters. IWY, naturally, started out with the appropriate fanfare and official blessings bestowed upon such a spectacular. Indeed, the outpouring of support for the IWY and its central

event, the World Conference scheduled for Mexico City in June, caught UN executives and delegates alike by surprise.[1] Few of the major UN programs in recent years generated as much attention and goodwill among members of the public as this one. To the UN as well as to women around the world, the IWY might have been a virtual God-send -- had its potential and promise not been betrayed.

In retrospect, it must be admitted, the politics of International Women's Year and its troubled World Conference appear but one of a series of raging controversies in the sensational UN blotter for 1975. It was nevertheless a historic event -- though in ways quite different than those conveyed by the determinedly pleased delegates at its completion. It was precisely in Mexico City in June '75, that the "NEW" UN-politics scored a breakthrough of singular importance. It was here that a UN assembly with delegates from 133 member states issued an overwhelming call for the condemnation and elimination of zionism; a precursor of explosive actions to follow in UN agencies and in the UN General Assembly. That resolution stands out as a remarkable one, not just because of its character and hotly contested passage. Most revealing is the fact that it emerged from a Conference convened with the express purpose of deliberating the problems and prospects of women in the contemporary world. And this, as we shall see, is an issue of such magnitude and complexity that it warrants greatly more than the total attention of delegates in one single and unique conference.

Yet in Mexico City, as in previous World Conferences, it was politics as usual for the UN. Demonstrated with greater clarity here than anywhere else to that point, what that has come to mean is the politics of the Third World majority with the support -- if not guidance -- of Communist states. The rights and life-opportunities of women today were issues of receding importance,

entangled and eventually submerged in the morass of ideological debacles now so characteristic of UN proceedings.

Strikingly, this crucial part of the story of the IWY and its embattled World Conference, was largely missed by the press in attendance. Far greater attention was given to the perceived shenanigans and rivalries of feminists in attendance at the non-official Women's Tribune. The most sympathetic treatments focused on the drama and spectacle of these thousands of women -- with widely different appearances, languages and life styles -- assembled together to discuss for once the problems of their own oppression. With ever new political intrigues coming to the fore and tempers exploding all over the scene, it was admittedly a grand show.

The shallowness of many news reports from Mexico City can only be said to be matched by the hopelessly Pollyannish accounts published by the UN itself. All grand declarations issued, every lofty principle propounded get to be faithfully recorded in UN annals and journals -- no matter what the actual intent or character of sponsorship involved. Dispatched to UN support groups throughout the world, the rhetoric may even be believed by the well-meaning humanists that comprise most of the memberships of the same.

The point is quite simply that the crucial lessons of the UN spectacular of 1975 remain to be learned. Rich as the anecdotal material is, it should not be allowed to overshadow an analysis of the politics of the IWY World Conference. The present and ongoing struggles by and within the international feminist movement can only be grasped within this context. What happened to International Women's Year -- "the Year that Wasn't"? What is the source of the apparent failure of the UN in this as well as other major problem areas put on its agenda in recent years? How do the "New Politics" of the UN affect

the prospects of women -- in terms of the world organization's responsibility and responsiveness towards the serious and persistent problems of sexual discrimination in contemporary cultures?

I

Why should the United Nations bother about women?

The question is not just tongue in cheek. To many it seems the world organization has enough acute and major crises on its hands, far more than it can handle already, for it to take on a set of new problems seemingly unrelated to the questions of human survival associated with, for instance, wars, terrorism, racism, ecological threats, food shortages or overpopulation. Besides, the UN itself can hardly be said to serve as a model for equality between the sexes. All of the fifty-five member delegations in the General Assembly are exclusively male, the percentage of women delegates usually runs about seven and in the Secretariat -- as in other decision-making bodies -- women occupy mainly clerical and lower staff positions; advisors and executives are usually male.[2] So -- why?

As it happens, it was precisely the recognition among experts and key officials that the fate of women today is inextricably bound up with the crisis of survival for all humans that finally produced a change of mind about International Women's Year.[3] The future of the world as they see it, will be heavily influenced, if not determined, by women. Take ecology, food, population -- concerns acute enough to warrant impressive commitments and grave anxiety on the part of many governments and the world organization itself -- threatened catastrophies in each and all of these areas cannot be effectively dealt with unless the status of women in the world is considered -- and <u>changed</u>.

Women's reproductive behavior will first of all have to be altered lest the population explosion is not to wreak havoc with the human environment and take its increasingly cruel toll in human suffering and tensions. That, it

turns out, cannot happen unless close to one billion women in the world today see their opportunities improved, even their life styles changed. Women's ability to work productively and effectively in modernizing economies is also of key importance, it is recognized, for the progress so desperately needed for two-thirds of humankind in our time. Women's chances for an education and for educating their own young is equally significant in the crises facing us both in food production and economic development generally. In brief, the status of women matters. Far more than earlier perceived, greatly more than still admitted by the majority of citizens and leaders throughout the world.

The series of findings, the whole scenario emerging from the research conducted up to now on women's rights and opportunities, presented a surprise to many. A very brief review of these will serve to illustrate the point and to show as well what could have been on the agenda for IWY and its "pioneering" World Conference.

II

Throughout the world in most cultures, males are valued more than females.

As terse as it is harsh, the above assessment is made by the United Nations itself.[4] When the curtains were about to part for the World Conference in Mexico City, experts in many fields came forth with findings and data that make for grim reading indeed. Briefly put: the status, the opportunities and way of life of women in most parts of the world is such as to put any official ideology or pronouncement for equality among humans to shame.

It is not just a question of equal pay for equal work, or a fair share of political representation -- for some time now the dominant issue among feminists

in the West. While these are problems for women throughout the world, we find patterns of oppression far crueler and more debilitating in existence in many of UN member states today. In some, women are oppressed to the point even of mutilation and virtual slavery.

• Women comprise by far the largest groups of illiterates in a number of contemporary societies. In the Mideast, nearly nine out of ten women are illiterate. In Africa, illiteracy among females is reported at 84%, in Asia at 57% and in Latin America, 27%. Illiteracy among men may be high as well in these areas, but it is constantly and significantly exceeded by the same among women.

• Even today one finds girls in the age group 7 to 14 enrolled in school to a lesser degree than boys in most developing countries. A few years ago, the percentage of girls as compared to boys in schools was forty.

• Millions of women work 10 to 18 hours daily for absolute zero money income. In Africa, in some parts of Asia and in Latin America, their backbreaking labor in agriculture usually brings them no more than they and their children need to exist. Virtually all of the food needed for the survival of the family is brought home by these women. Yet their contributions are ignored by economists and remain uncounted in the national GNP. They remain largely unappreciated "beasts of burden".

• Even as International Women's Year was launched, we find a woman deprived by law of a number of important personal rights and freedoms in many countries. Her right to work may be subject to the implied or express authorization of the husband (e.g., Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, the Philipines, Uruguay). She may be unable to obtain a passport and travel outside the country without written permission from her husband (e.g., Iran, Zaire). She may be forbidden from

from buying contraceptive devices or to learn to drive a car (e.g., Saudi Arabia, United Arab Republic, Libya).

• In a number of countries the law also requires obedience by the wife to her husband (e.g., Columbia, Ethiopia, Jordan, Mali).

• Divorce can be obtained by mere command of the husband in some countries, but is forbidden to the wife except in highly unusual circumstances (e.g., Egypt, Afghanistan). Polygamy remains and is widespread in several African and Arab societies.

• Customs and traditions in many countries create patterns of oppression far more severe than legal reviews will reveal. In many countries of the Mideast, the ancient practice of the Purdah still prevails: women cannot leave their homes before covering their bodies in heavy layers of clothing from head to toe, ever inhibited in movement, never to feel the rays of the sun or the fresh breezes of the wind upon their limbs.

• In these same societies -- and in many others -- the insistence is still on "preserving the honor of the men through the purity of their women". The result is sexual repression and a pernicious double standard where any real or suspected transgression by a woman -- married or not -- carries heavy penalties. Brutal killing of girls found not to be virgins upon marriage are not uncommon in Moslem communities. For men there are no equivalent standards or penalties.

• In Burma, Belgium, Costa Rica, Luxembourg, Nicaragua and Venezuela, a husband's adultery is considered grounds for divorce only if he brings his mistress into the matrimonial home. When committed by a wife, adultery is considered grounds for divorce under any and all circumstances. Penalties vary widely as well. A man who kills his wife after catching her at adultery

gets six months to three years in prison in Venezuela. A wife can get 20 years for the same act.

• The desire to control women sexually is carried to the extremes of sexual mutilation in some African and Mideast societies (e.g., Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt). Millions of girls still have to go through the painful and debilitating "ceremony" of having their clitoris removed. Whether in its milder or more radical form (Sunna circumcision - removal of the tip of the clitoris; or Infibulation - removal of the entire clitoris, plus the labia minora and parts of the majora with subsequent "sewing up" of the area), the operation is performed usually without medication or proper hygienic precautions by older women. The result is infections that take weeks or months to heal, and -- in the case of radical circumcision -- painful and difficult childbirth ever after.[5]

• In India, in Sri Lanka and throughout the Moslem World, the practice of male sexual privilege often extends to the vital area of food consumption. Women and girls get to eat, in the kitchen preferably, in Arab countries -- only after men and boys have had their full share. Where food is scarce, the result is a higher degree of undernourishment and death by starvation for the female sex. It is this shocking situation that is behind the surprising excess numbers of men as compared to females in many countries, even today.

• All over the world today, women working outside the home tend to be concentrated in jobs that are lesser paid and require no professional training. Women do, in fact, comprise more than a third of the world's gainfully employed labor force. Yet even in the industrialized countries where feminist lobbies and movements have been active for years (e.g., the Common Market countries), women's wages are only about 50 to 80 percent of men's for the same work time.

• The female half of the nation is denied even the right to vote in no less than nine countries, all members of the UN in International Women's Year. In Lichtenstein, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Quatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and six states of Nigeria, women have no political status.

• The difficulty women have in gaining political power is well known; only three have been elected on their own to the highest office in the land (Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandaranaike). Women in cabinet positions are not quite that rare, but more often than not they get to head ministries considered more or less female -- welfare, health, education, women's affairs.

• Women are also far from enjoying their share of representation in legislative assemblies throughout the world. In Western democracies, they make up only a tiny minority in parliaments, though often comprising more than half of eligible voters (e.g., the United States -- with 3 percent female representation in Congress).

• The Soviet Union appears to have one of the best records with one-third of its Supreme Soviet female; yet -- nearly 60 years after the communist revolution -- only one woman has ever made it into the all-powerful Politburo. The record is no better for the new and more radical "people's democracy" of China; as of 1970, only 13 women were included among the 170 members of the Communist Party's Central Committee and -- as in the Soviet Union -- only one woman reached the highest grade as one of the 21 members of the Politburo.

III

The above findings afford only glimpses into the realities of life for hundreds of millions of women today. What they reveal, however, are patterns

of discrimination both systematic and universal. In many a case, the treatment afforded the female sex is so blatantly unjust and severe as to clearly warrant the designation oppression. Politically, socially, physically, we find the female half of humankind subject to humiliations and repressions that are both different and more debilitating than the burdens imposed through the ages on humans in general. Women's fate as designed by men in many ancient and contemporary societies is such as to belie and make a mockery of UN's own Declaration of Human Rights.

Such a recognition carries profound implications. We do not yet know what the world will be like when and if the most universal and ancient form of oppression known to us comes to an end. But we are beginning to understand that the addition of talents, ideas and skills from more than one billion will give a mighty push to the ascent toward a fully developed and socially responsive world. An unprecedented opportunity awaits contemporary societies today -- to liberate at last the slumbering potential and largely wasted energies of the female of the species. No leader or activist committed to economic and political development can ignore this mind-boggling prospect.

The United Nations, certainly, is appraised of it. Volumes of research and reports presented to officials and delegates during IWY point to the significance and urgency of upgrading women's status. How can a society develop and achieve the leap into modernity desired by many if half of the nation is systematically prevented from making the contributions it is capable of? Is there any chance for large-scale change in the mind-sets of children when mothers continue only in their severely circumscribed, tradition-bound roles, illiterate or minimally educated? Can there be any reduction in the high fertility rates now threatening all progress in many countries unless women

find alternatives to childbearing and motherhood as their primary or only accepted role in life?

The answers appear clear. The problems of development -- particularly those associated with the population crisis -- cannot be solved in isolation. The status of women is far from being a peripheral issue -- though the whole problem area may still be ignored or treated with embarrassment or annoyance by most governments and planners.

The population explosion offers the most striking and dramatic example of the interrelationships in effect here. Data concerning the alarming growth rates in most Third World countries are widely publicized; the very most optimistic forecasts set population in the developing world at about 6.5 billion in another 25 years -- an increase of 158 percent over the 2.5 billion in 1972. By contrast, the developed world (Europe, North America excluding Mexico, Australia, Japan, New Zealand) will see its population grow a mere 38 percent, from 1.1 billion to 1.6 in the same time period. It is, in other words, the countries that have the least to offer for the sustenance of their populations, the gravest problems in meeting the most elemental needs of their people even today that will experience a tripling in the number of mouths to feed in less than a generation.

Note that these are also the countries with the highest rates of female illiteracy and greatest educational gaps between men and women. Very often they are equally the countries where women suffer from the most severe restrictions, imposed by law or by customs and traditions. Three conclusions leap at you from any survey of the data: The greater the inequality of women, the more backward the nation. The lesser the opportunities for women, the higher the fertility rates. The more rapid the population growth, the harder it is to

launch and sustain successful development.

A vicious circle, indeed. The interrelationship between population, development and the status of women came into sharp focus only during preparations for the World Population Year.[6] At the World Population Conference in Bucharest August 1975, women themselves took action to bring it to the attention of the thousands of delegates assembled here. In the midst of the ideological debacle unfolding in Bucharest the right of women to freely and responsibly decide the number and spacing of their children was one issue few could take objection to. Though some Third World delegates hotly asserted that "Our women want large families" and "Our women will not consider such means as abortion . . ." their proclamations were proven suspect by research presented at the Conference. For women will seek to avail themselves of family planning, it is shown, whenever and wherever it is available and they are not forced to refrain from these opportunities for fear of alienating a dominant male. Women will also limit the size of their families whenever and wherever they are given opportunities for education and gainful employment outside the home -- regardless of the male. As for abortion, the alarmingly high abortion rates in the Third World belies assertions of women wanting larger families, women refusing birth control means. In developing countries -- where abortions are illegal and performed by non-medical personnel with a high degree of danger to the mother -- it is estimated that every third pregnancy is so terminated.

How critical is the problem? To the "population hawks" of the West it is number one on the agenda of pressing needs and concerns. To those taking "the Revolutionist", "the anti-Malthusian" or "the Anti-colonial" positions,* population pressures are of no consequence, are good, in fact, for a) development, for b) the military and political power of the new states, or for c) sharpening the fundamental social and political contradictions that will inevitably lead to

a just revolution.[7] Family planning to these true believers -- and they were in the majority in Bucharest -- is mainly a plot by the West, or at the very least a red herring, aiding persistent attempts to keep the Third World under control and robbing it of its natural resources.

In the high political drama played out on center stage at the World Population Conference only women and population researchers avoided the ideological pitfalls of the debate, and provided ideas and insights that made possible some agreement at last. Stressing the rights of the individual together with the interrelationship between the status of women, family planning and development, the concensus position arrived at called for greater freedom of choice for women in determining their role in society. It also incorporated demands for a redistribution of the world's resources and full respect for national sovereignty in regard to population matters.

The UN at last appeared to recognize the problem. Helvi Sipila, with considerable satisfaction, noted the change of mind and slowly dawning realization of UN members in a recent International Forum on the Role of Women in Population and Development:

> . . . population statistics are the tip of the iceberg only. Women are, if you will, the submerged two-thirds. It is women who give births to children . . . women are more than half of the world's population . . . We cannot hope to create the necessary conditions for growth while leaving aside half of the human resources required for that growth.[8]

With that in mind, the UN's General Assembly gave its final blessing to the launching of International Women's Year. And with women's role in the population crisis so forcefully brought to attention, the UN committed the remaining funds from the Population Conference - $250,000 -- to what was to be the high point of the year: The World Conference in Mexico City. Not out of empathy with women necessarily -- but for the sake of development, for

economic progress, for "peace".

IV

Support for an International Year and Conference on Women was by no means unanimous within the UN and it must be noted that the funds committed to the effort were piddling ones, given the usual expenditures granted to major world conferences under UN auspices. By comparison, the World Population Conference in Bucharest, Romania in August of 1974 had a budget of more than 3 million dollars whereas the World Conference scheduled for June this year -- the Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver, Canada, -- will have more than six million dollars allotted to it.

The problems went beyond meager funds and overt resistance on the part of some delegates. While the distinguished Ambassador from Saudi Arabia protested against launching of the Year -- claiming: "Women have more equality than men!" [9] -- the Commission on the Rights of Women found their plans greatly hindered by being given too little time, by having the site of the Conference changed at a very late date and, of course, by the uncertainty of contributions to the Voluntary Fund for the IWY.[10] Starting with the initial commitment of two hundred fifty thousand dollars, the Commission found that only 16 governments promised to add to the Fund as the Year was launched. As late as May 1975 only 13 had delivered on their promises. A last minute generous contribution of one million dollars from Princess Ashraf Pahlavi of Iran saved the day in the end, though both the skimpiness of funds and unusual difficulties met with in the planning stages contributed to the many working problems of the Conference.

The psychological blows dealt the IWY and its central event were, however, the most difficult to deal with. First, the government of Columbia suddenly

decided to disinvite the UN to have this pioneering Conference in the capital of the country. Bogota had been selected as the site earlier in the year as Columbia was the first Latin American Country to respond to the UN's inquiries in this regard. World Conferences of the UN are elaborate affairs with several thousands of delegates and advisors in attendance together with hundreds of members of the international press corps. This was the first time in the history of the UN that a government had rescinded an invitation to host such a spectacular event. Coming as late as it did, the decision was not just demoralizing, but had the effect of throwing off the planning and creating near insurmountable obstacles to the organizaing of a successful conference.[10] A new invitation from the government of Mexico was accepted with few preliminaries and announcements finally went out as late as December 1975 that the site of the IWY's central event was now to be Mexico City.

Rumors soon began to fly that what was behind the last minute offer from Mexico was the personal ambitions of President Luis Echeverria. With barely a year to go in the highest office of his country, Mr. Echeverria was said to be hungry for the office of Secretary General of the United Nations -- soon to be vacated. A prime mover in the push of the Third World states for a New International Economic Order, Mr. Echeverria now declared himself a champion of women's rights as well.

It was but the first sign of the intrusion of Mexican politics in the dynamics of IWY and its threatened World Conference. A more formidable challenge was awaiting the planners and the thousands of women who still had hopes for a significant event to highlight and curb the formidable problem of sexual discrimination around the world.

The next blow dealt aimed at the Draft International Plan of Action prepared by the Secretariat under the direction of Helvi Sipila, UN Assistant

Secretary General and newly declared Secretary General for the IWY Conference. Such a Plan is meant to be the culminating achievement coming out of UN World Conferences; with recommendations, requests and action items for discussion and deliberation in the hope of eventual agreement on the key of these among participating delegations. The Draft International Plan was therefore a carefully elaborated document, created to be as politically non-controversial as possible and maintaining throughout a focus on the problems caused by sexual discrimination and the urgent needs for change in this area. Affirming the human rights of women, as accepted in previous UN instruments, the Plan called for action to eliminate injustices and restriction of opportunities to women in the area of work education, political and social life. The agenda was a large one, the review of problems documented in UN publications was compelling, though of necessity brief.

Yet the attempt to maintain a focus on women in the Plan came under attack even before the Conference convened. As the consultative committee of 23 nations met in New York on March 3-14, what surfaced was a concerted drive to re-order the priorities of the IWY. Developing countries, constituting the majority of the committee, wanted to consider first the problems of society and the creation of the New International Economic Order. After that -- and only after that -- was the Conference to take up possible programs and efforts to improve the status of women.

The controversy erupting here was not a new one. In the previous General Assembly Session, developed and developing countries had clashed over the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties demanded by the Group of 77 (all LDCs -- lesser developed countries). The U.S. was particularly opposed to the demands for indexing -- setting a fixed relationship between the price of the developing

countries raw materials and the price of the developed countries manufactured goods -- and the assertion of absolute sovereignty in the matter of nationalizing foreign enterprises. The Group of 86, led by Mexico, now stated categorically that such international re-ordering would have to precede any improvement in the position of women.

It was a move reminiscent of the many earlier actions that threatened to destroy fruitful dialogue and cooperation in previous world conferences. Instead of maintaining a focus on either the environmental crisis, population or food, delegates to conferences in the past became embroiled in the very same ideological debacle; rich versus poor, imperialism or neo-colonialism versus national liberation, North versus South . . .

Protests of Western delegates were -- as before -- ignored. As some pointed out, their resistance did not necessarily stem from any serious disagreement with the need for a new international ordering. The fear was simply that the issues up for deliberation -- that long-awaited inquiry into the sources, patterns and consequences of sexual discrimination -- would, again, be shunted aside. The problems of women, it seemed, were not to be the main agenda. Particularly hurtful was the fact that the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties contained no provisions ensuring the participation of women or any benefits accruing to women in the requested transfer of wealth from North to South.[12] The answer from the Group of 77 was, in essence, that the whole future of a new international economic order vitally affects the future of women.

There was, of course, no time to consider the feasibility of the Charter proposed. Nor was there consideration of the consequences -- for women -- as their one and only World Conference now seemed destined to turn into another battleground for the true and tried issues of the new UN politics.

V

As might be expected, the ideological confrontation between North and South, rich and poor etc. erupted at the very opening stages of the Conference in Mexico City. It soon became clear that the attention of participants and the media was to be riveted on issues that had little or no relevance to the problems caused by sexual discrimination in the world today. The insensitivity betrayed by the Mexican government and President Echeverria as delegates were officially welcomed was but a foreboding of the distortions to be demonstrated later.

The President, it turned out, had two different sets of gifts ready for the distinguished delegates from 133 countries. For the men: An impressive book, depicting Mexico's history and present politics and culture. For the women: A little black baby doll in a wicker cradle -- handcrafted by Indian women of Mexico. The Mexican government, in addition, insisted on the conventional privilege of the host country to nominate a president for the World Conference. Since no women have been elevated to ministerial positions in the government, it would have to be a man: Pedro Ojeda Paullada, the Attorney General of Mexico. Opposition to this remarkable selection came only from women participants to the un-official Women's Tribune, who found their stance more than justified when Mr. Paullada in his first press conference insisted "there was nothing new" about the issues raised by feminists at the Tribune. He had "heard it all before."

Many women reporters were still reeling from the shock of attending the Journalism Encounter organized by the UN immediately prior to the opening of the World Conference. Arranged essentially for the benefit of fifty invited

UN Fellows -- all journalists from the Third World -- but open to all registered journalists, the Encounter was the first exposure of many to the schism between North and South in the UN and to the rather painful isolation of Western participants. Not only were the panels presented in the four days of the Encounter overwhelmingly dominated by Third-World representatives, but journalists from outside these favored areas were not given opportunities even to ask questions and enter into the discussion. Hands were ignored, requests denied and caucuses as well as receptions closed to the "rich outsiders."

The most sobering discovery was still that of having the issues of women set aside or belittled. The problem, many of the panelists would have us believe, was not sexual discrimination, but Western imperialism, neo-colonialist exploitation, female chauvinism in the U.S., etc. One male Ethiopian radio executive even went so far as to charge that the whole issue of women's rights was but a red herring; another conspiracy on the part of Western powers to create tensions and splits within the Third World -- the better to rule it.

As the more than one thousand official delegates settled down to do the work of the IWY Conference, it was quickly apparent that the tone of debate and choice of issues in the Journalism Encounter was a precursor for actions to follow. In the general debate that occupied the plenary for most of the two week session, the only speeches or comments to elicit fervent and spontaneous response were those of Third World delegates sharply on the attack against the U.S., Western imperialism generally and Israel specifically. Even Prime Minister Olof Palme of Sweden, a Socialist known for his early and sharp public opposition to the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, received barely polite applause or just silence from his Third World colleagues even as he declared himself in favor of the New International Economic Order and pledged Sweden's support for the new

effort to redistribute the riches of the world.

To be sure, the plenary session was for the most part pervaded by either an air of unreality or just deadly tedium. Representatives from 125 governments and 36 inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations offered their obligatory speeches. Most chose to emphasize the progress made, the laudable efforts of their own governments in improving the status of women. In fact, the only sharply critical comments in regard to persisting sexual discrimination within their own societies came from representatives from the developed world. Elizabeth Reid of Australia even used that "forbidden" word sexism and described how women are subject to "colonization by mute consent". Francoise Giroud, France's Minister for Women, criticized her own governments attitudes towards women's right to have an abortion. She also warned against attempts to divert the attention of women from the issues before them. The revolutionary force which women now represent should not be used once again by men for their own end.

The great majority of speakers, though women, did not declare themselves in favor of this view. Instead they reiterated their belief in the need for a basic economic and social change at the national and international levels before women could be fully emancipated.

The emotional high points of the plenary debate came on two occasions: The appearance on the podium of Israel's representative and the address of P.L.O.'s representative. The former was met with an abrupt walkout of forty delegations just as Mrs. Leah Rabin began her speech. By contrast the latter received a standing ovation lasting nearly ten minutes by a majority of Third World delegations.

The intrusion of raging controversies of the international power struggle--none of which related in the remotest sense to the issue of sexual discrimination--

was even more evident in the two committees. Of the most than one hundred resolutions introduced and 34 passed, those receiving the greatest attention and eliciting the most passionate response had, again, to do with Palestinians and Zionism. Thus, Resolution 31 -- passed with the solid support of Third World and Socialist countries in the 2nd Committee considers that "international co-operation and peace requires . . . the elimination of . . . zionism" and appeals to all states and international organizations to extend moral and material assistance to the Palestinian and Arab women.

The elimination of zionism was also the most controversial section of the Draft Declaration of Mexico, hotly and emotionally debated in the First Committee. Submitted by 74 developing countries, the Draft Declaration contained the demand for a New International Economic Order as well and was overwhelmingly passed as an attachment to the World Plan of action. In the end, only two states voted against the Declaration -- the United States and Israel -- while 18 abstained.

Other resolutions of note -- considering the time and attention devoted to their passage -- were those on the Panama Canal, on aid to the Vietnamese people, on political repression in Chile, on South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia and support for national liberation movements in Africa. The need to end colonial and imperialist oppression and the creation of a new international economic order were thus the overriding issues of importance in the two weeks of deliberation within the committees.

"I have sat here (in the First Committee) for several days now and not heard one word spoken of women", said Elizabeth Reid in a press conference of the Australian Delegation. It is notable as well that the Second Committee -- which first passed a resolution calling for the condemnation and elimination

of Zionism -- rejected with equal enthusiasm a resolution asking "sexism" to be added to the list of obstacles to women's achievement of equality.

It was a surprise, in the end, that the World Plan of Action could be passed at all, shot through with reservations as it was, with controversies raging throughout concerning amendments and declarations added to the original Draft. Actually, the final action on the Plan came as a result of a parliamentary coup. A consensus resolution was introduced -- and passed -- very late in the night before the closing day of the Conference. To have spent more than two weeks of deliberations -- and a budget of nearly two million dollars -- and not even produce a Plan of Action for women, might have been quite an embarrassment for both delegates and UN officials . . .

As it is, the World Plan of Action for IWY presents a "shopping bag" in the description of Helvi Sipila herself. Its proposals and recommendations on behalf of women are unobjectionable enough; principles of justice and equality are served by recognition of existing problems and calls for their rectification--without any specifity.

Apart from the fact that the Plan has "no teeth" in it -- it is entirely up to member governments to decide whether or not to follow its sensible suggestions -- its value as a document of principle is surely put in question by the addition of the Declaration of Mexico. The hypocrisy of this remarkable document is revealed not only in the passages referring to Zionism, but in the protest against "all forms of repression and inhuman treatment . . . including imprisonment, torture . . . restriction of movement" and so on. Signed by -- among other governments -- Chile, Brasil, Iran and Uganda!

VI

Not even the strong presence of women delegates -- and they outnumbered

men five to two -- prevented the IWY Conference from being turned into an ideological debacle all too familiar to veteran UN observers. While it is not clear to what extent women from the Third World acted on their own accord or simply followed instructions from their governments, it must also be remembered that delegates were rarely picked because of their feminist commitments and achievements on behalf of women's rights. More often than not, they were the "token" women; wives of high officials or women professionals in government service. The social distance between them and the mass of women in their own societies was surely greater than that in effect for delegates from the developed world.

Above all, it was nationalist sentiment rather than feminist sensitivities that prompted the action and rhetoric at the IWY Conference. The disappointments and resentment expressed at the widening economic gap between their nations and those of the West is not hard to understand. Their reluctance to point out and attack patterns of sexual discrimination in their own societies -- no matter how severe -- may also stem from a recognition of the fragility of the political order.[13]

The arguments, nevertheless, of Western complicity for the problems of women in the developing world, of Western "feminist conspiracies" and cultural imperialism do not hold up under honest scrutiny. It is very clear from any survey of sexual discrimination in the contemporary world that the most severe problems are found in developing countries. Whether it is polygamy, cliterectomy, purdah, restrictions on the freedom of movement of women or denial of divorce to women, -- these are practices not known to the West -- or North. To suggest that the most severe instances of oppression of women documented in the Third World are caused by or linked to imperialism is to make a mockery of history.

The customs referred to were in existence long before any intrusion of Western rule or culture in Africa, Asia or the Mideast.

One may, indeed, suspect that the Third World position also reflected a disdain on the part of their male-dominated government in regard to the very idea and goal of the IWY Conference. The demand to put the New International Economic Order as the first priority item on the agenda may likewise be interpreted as an attempt to divert attention from the issues at hand. There was, of course, no possiblity for the IWY Conference to effectively debate and take action on that complicated and controversial plan. Any more than it was possible that the IWY Conference could solve the explosive problems of international politics that have evaded the attempts of solution by powerbrokers of a very different and higher order.

In the end the "new" UN politics succeeded only in this: To crowd the agenda with issues irrelevant to women, to take up the time of delegates with problems beyond their province and capabilities and thereby to avoid a close and hard look at prevailing problems of sexual discrimination of an especially severe nature. The hope for solutions, for final elimination of the worst patterns of oppression of women were, again, dimmed. Not even the UN could be made to speak with clarity and specificity about the overt denial of elemental human rights in many countries to this half of humankind.

The greatest contribution of the world organization in this "Year of the Women" may have been in the research commissioned and published about the rights and opportunities of women in contemporary cultures. Though still skimpy by comparison to the documentation brought forth on other issues, the 18 reports are significant because they at least begin to fill what was formerly a vacuum. The UN may thereby have set in motion forces that may not be so easily controlled.

Interviews with women delegates and officials at the Secretariat in February confirmed the impression of new initiatives and drives on the part of women's groups throughout the world. The IWY and its ill-fated conference may have this unintended consequence: To legitimize feminism, to make respectable the issue of women's rights precisely in the countries that just began to pay lip-service to the same in an effort to use the Year for their own opportunistic purposes.

The ideological debacle of the IWY Conference -- just as those of the previous World Conferences on environment, population and food -- raises serious questions about the structure of the world organization and the uses to which it is put. These potentially important meetings have become victims of the disproportions caused by the one nation -- one vote rule, just as has the General Assembly. While egalitarian in theory, the principle is destructive in practice; the power of the numerical majority is inflated way out of proportion to the real dimensions of power possessed by the same. Given the genuinely felt resentments and compelling sense of insecurity in regard to the future experienced by many Third World leaders, the temptation is strong to use this unique forum to lash out and penalize by rhetoric and diplomatic action the powers that seem so infinitely more advantaged. The North-South conflict is greatly aggravated by the Cold War that is still being fought in the UN -- divorced usually of any pretense to detente. The readiness of Communists to exploit available opportunities to increase tension and hostilities between the Third World and the West was demonstrated most clearly in the World Population Conference.[14]

The problem for the UN is also that continued support for the world organization by the countries that now supply most of its financial mainstay

depends to a great extent on support from the publics in the same. The spectacle presented by continuous, unrelieved harangues against Western democracies and against Israel is now eroding that support to the point where even the Senate and Union leaders in the U.S. have publicly called for a withdrawal from the General Assembly and a reduction in funds to the operation of the far flung activities of the world organization. The U.S. government has already withdrawn from UNESCO and put the ILO on notice of its withdrawal from that organization within the next two years.

Finally, it seems clear that given the insistence on absolute unfettered sovereignty for member states, there is very, very little the UN can do to compel any solutions to the crisis facing humankind. The UN at present is simply an extension of the international anarchy it was designed to replace. This is the real world, to be sure. But for the UN to be of value, it must transcend such realities and speak at least with the moral force the organization was originally endowed with. That requires, however, a restructuring and reorientation that can take the organization out of its present ideological morass and allow it to address itself with authority to at least this, -- the overt denial of elemental human rights to large groups of people in many of its member states. Women around the world have the greatest stake of all in such a change.

FOOTNOTES

1. See reports of Helvi Sipila, Secretary General of the IWY. MEETING IN MEXICO; (United Nations, N.Y. 1975)

2. Women and the UN. UNITAR NEWS, Vol. 7, No. 1 1975; (United Nations, N.Y. 1975)

3. MEETING IN MEXICO, op. cit. pp 17-18. See also Esther Borerup and Christina Lilyunkrantz: Integration of Women in Development: Why, When, How. (N.Y.: UN's Development Program, 1975); and Lester R. Brown: Population Strategy For A Finite Planet, (UN Centre for Economic and Social Information, N.Y. 1975.)

4. See: Equal Partners: International Women's Year, 1975, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Center for IWY, 1975)

5. Reports and documentation concerning cliterectomy and infibulation presented in WIN (Women's International Network) NEWS, Vol 1, No. 3, June 1975, (Lexington, Massachusetts), pp 39-42.

6. See for example: Anthony Astrachan: "People Are The Most Precious," Saturday Review/World, 10/19 1974, p 10. See also: People, Vol. 1, Number 5, 1975.

7. These are the designations given the major positions in opposition to population planning in an incisive review by Michael S. Teitelbaum: "Population and Development: Is a Consensus Possible?" Foreign Affairs, July 1974, pp. 742-760.

8. Quoted in Equal Partners, op. cit., p. 7.

9. Meeting in Mexico, op. cit., p. 18.

10. Kathleen Tettsch, "The Selling of Women's Year 1975: UN Is Finding It No Easy Matter," New York Times, June 4, 1975, p. 3.

11. Elizabeth Reid, "Behind the Official Lines," MS. Magazine, Nov. 1975, p. 89.

12. See Meeting in Mexico, op. cit., p. 7.

13. This is, for instance, suggested by Jennifer Seymor Whitaker in, "Women of the World: Report from Mexico City," Foreign Affairs, Oct. 1975, p. 177.

14. See "Population and Development", op. cit.; "People Are the Most Precious", op. cit.; and People, op. cit.